



Newsletter of the African Burial Ground & Five Points Archaeological Projects

UPDATE

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Update, the newsletter of the African Burial Ground and Five Points Archaeological Projects, is published by the Office of Public Education and Interpretation of the African Burial Ground (OPEI), at 6 World Trade Ctr., Rm. 239, New York, NY 10048, (212) 432-5707, for the purpose of providing current information on New York City's African Burial Ground and its historical context.

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Taking the African Burial Ground Into The Classroom

Dr. Sherrill D. Wilson

The Summer 1997 African Burial Ground Educator's Symposium, held at 6 World Trade Center on Saturday, August 23, 1997, was the fifteenth such gathering aimed at equipping New York area teachers, parents, the media and community leaders with information and resources for educating students and others about the landmark New York African Burial Ground and the early origins of New York's African American presence.

Since the 1993 inception of the Office of Public Education & Interpretation of the African Burial Ground Project (OPEI) more than 60,000 students and teachers have made use of its services and resources. Phyllis Murray, school librarian at P.S. 75 in the Bronx, offered this comment: "As educators, we need an ongoing commitment to the African Burial Ground Project, and we also need to utilize the information that the project provides for the public at large. This information is available, gratis and it is sorely needed in order to help teachers challenge the myths that reverberate around the issue of slavery in the Americas, especially slavery in the North. I welcome every opportunity to attend these wellplanned sessions which allows me to establish ongoing articulation with scholars and researchers in the goal of giving dignity to our African ancestors and their contemporary descendants."

The services of the OPEI, which includes on and off-site slide presentations, film viewings, the *Update* quarterly newsletter and other supplemental materials, is aimed at students as young as third grade through college level. This *Update* issue is dedicated to educators globally who seek to enlighten themselves and their students on the achievement and contributions of Africans and their descendants throughout the Diaspora, despite the atrocities of the transatlantic slave trade and its aftermath.

Sankofa: We look to the Past to Inform the Future!!!

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and more!

"Give a man of color an equal opportunity from the cradle to manhood, and from manhood to the grave and you would discover the dignified statesman, the man of conscience, and the philosopher." --- Maria W. Stewart, 1833



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



Revisiting the Past

It was extremely fascinating to learn about a major part of history. Many of us felt a connection to the people in the African Burial Ground. It was a link to our history and many of us would like to come back in the year 2000! You were inspiring to us all.

Operation Understanding
San Diego, California

A Poetic Thanks

The seventh grade of St. Catherine of Genoa really liked the tour about the African Burial Ground. We appreciate your time and devotion to us, and to show you how much we appreciated it, we made up poems about the African Burial Ground itself. And we promise not to say "slave" when talking about the Black people. We say "enslaved Africans." Thank you for the wonderful time.

The Seventh Grade
St. Catherine of Genoa
Brooklyn, N.Y.

[Ed. note: The poetic work of St. Catherine of Genoa school appears in the Children's Corner on page 14.]

A Colonial Update

This project is of special interest since I am writing a chapter on the African American population of the colonial United States for a forthcoming Cambridge University Press volume on the population and history of North America and hope that I may be able to include information from the archaeological analysis of the African Burial Ground as one of the few sites dating to the eighteenth century. I look forward to receiving further updates as the analysis proceeds.

Lorena S. Walsh, Historian
The Colonial Williamsburgh
Foundation, Williamsburgh, VA.

Academic Feedback

The summer course on "Issues in Preservation of Urban Sites: Museology, History, and Archaeology of New York City" for New York University, Museum Studies Program has recently come to a close. I am writing to thank you for the presentations made by the staff of Public Education & Interpretation on the history, status and future of the African Burial Ground project and related education programs. Presentations from OPEI staff made a lasting impression on the students' understanding of preservation and interpretation of this important site. I look forward to working with you in preservation of this and other sites vital to our cultural heritage.

Daniel N. Pagano, Ph.D.
New York University
New York, N.Y.

Hands-on Learning

The slide presentation was excellent. I also believe that the introduction to anthropology, as a social science that is relevant to Black life, or the Black experience, was extremely useful. Many of the students were inspired to learn more about anthropology as a direct result. I would suggest that the speaker bring with her/him actual artifacts or other materials to give or allow students to experience a bit of the reality. In other words, let the students come in contact, if possible, with a sample of some of the artifacts found at the site.

Professor Zain Abdullah
Rutgers University, Newark, N.J.

I think the lab displays should be easier to view -- glass on all four sides perhaps. It would be great if kids could have practice at cleaning artifacts (not real of course).

Andrea Schwartz, Teacher, P.S. 3
New York, N.Y.

[Ed. note: OPEI is funded primarily as a public education office organized to address inquiries related to New York's African Burial Ground. Our educational resources can be used in conjunction with archaeological museums such as New York Unearthed, located at 17 State Street in lower Manhattan].

Falashas In Exile

On behalf of the Falasha Research Resurrection Institute, it is with special gratitude I say thank you for the use of the African Burial Site for our Memorial Service on August 7, 1997. It was truly an honor to us to have been able to hold the service on this Holy Ground. Because of the excellent cooperation we received from the Office of Public Education, the Memorial Service was a success.

Our mandate was created for the express purpose of bringing wisdom, knowledge, and understanding of our history, culture and ancient teachings to the community and the world. May God bless you, your family and staff with abundant fortitude and peace, especially in all your endeavors in the very important and crucial work you are doing to restore our heritage.

Dada Falasha Luka
Founder & Deliverer
Falashas In Exile, Bklyn., N.Y.

**OPEI welcomes letters but reserves
the right to edit for length or clarity.**

Voice of a People: *The Origins of the African American Press*

Dr. Sherrill D. Wilson

Annals of popular chronologies and histories of New York City note the year 1827 as the year of emancipation by legislature, of the enslaved African men and women of New York (Jackson: 1994, Low & Clift:1981; Salz - man, Smith & West:1991, et. al).

This 1799 statute from the New York Senate Assembly, notes the hours and conditions of the said "emancipation:"

An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery... Be it enacted by the people of the state of New-York, represented in Senate and Assembly, That every child born within this state after the fourth day of July next, shall be deemed and adjudged to be born free: Provided nevertheless, That such child shall be the servant of the legal proprietor of his or her mother until such servant... Shall arrive at the age of 28 years.

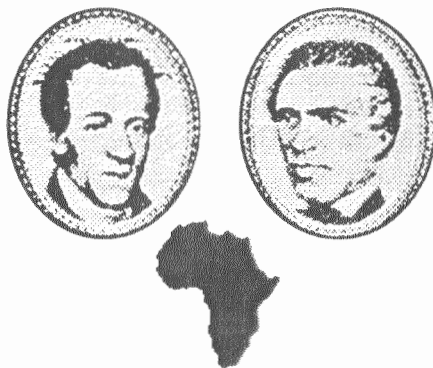
As a result of this statute, by 1844 all enslaved Africans living in New York State were deemed free people of color. Freedom however, did not guarantee an equal status with European descended New Yorkers. Racial and class discrimination continued to characterize the lives of African New Yorkers (Wilson: 1994).

Earlier that same year, in March the New York African American press was born in the form of the weekly publication, *Free-*

FREEDOM'S JOURNAL

"Righteousness Exalteth a Nation"

1827 - 1829



Samuel E. Cornish (left) and John B. Russwurm (right), publishers of the nation's first African American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*.

dom's Journal, published from its office at 150-152 Church Street. The newspaper was published and co-edited by a local Presbyterian minister, and businessman, free born African American, Samuel Eli Cornish (1795-1858), and educator, and colonizationist, John Brown Russwurm, (1799-1851).

The first copy was issued on March 16, 1827. From this copy we may glean the intentions of its authors:

The civil rights of a people being of the greatest value, it shall be our duty to vindicate our brethren, when oppressed; and to lay the case before the publik with a view to arrest the progress of prejudice and to shield ourselves against the consequent of evils...

The editors were clear about their goals to raise issues of concern to freeborn people such as themselves, as well as, those who yet remained enslaved in both the North and the South:

We shall also urge upon our brethren the expediency of using their elective franchise (sic: right to vote); and of making an independent use of same. We wish them not to become the tools of the party.

Freedom's Journal was created in response to the rampant racism and discrimination against Africans living in pre-emancipation New York City. "Originally it served as a vehicle for answering the attacks on blacks made by the New York Enquirer," notes historian Sandra Roff (Jackson:1994).

Early 19th century newspapers generally promoted the notion of Africans as socially, morally and generally inferior to Whites. Mario Charles and Sandra Roff note, "The inferiority of the black race was an accepted theory (sic: of) nineteenth century Americans (1996:11). They continued: "The white populace feared insurrections by blacks and news travelled quickly of possible riots. The New York Evening Post (sic: in 1823) reported that ten Negroes, owned by prominent citizens of New York State were accused of conspiring to rebel against their masters" (1996:12).

Africans were viewed as commodities, to be bought, sold and recaptured should they attempt to escape enslavement. The majority of newspaper items regarding Africans enslaved or free nationwide, prior to the publication of *Freedom's Journal*, were runaway and sale advertisements such as the following:

Ran Away from the Subscriber, an indentured Colored boy named DAVID SMITH, between eleven and twelve years old. He is now harking around Brooklyn. All persons are forbidden from harboring him, on penalty of the law. He is a great rogue, and I will give his indentures to any person who can govern him...

LITTELLIER CAMBIE

(*Long Island Star*, Jan. 10, 1823)

Freedom's Journal marked a new era for depicting African descended people, by African descended people. In contrast, it provided public notices of community events and meetings, advertised products and services which were viewed as beneficial to African American patrons, often by African businesses, in New York, as well as Philadelphia. Four such advertisements follow:

CONCERT in St. Philips Church
The public is respectfully informed That a CONCERT of Sacred Music Will be given at St. Philips Church (in Collect Street) on Tuesday Evening, next, under the direction of Mr. Rabreson...

(*Freedom's Journal*, Fri., April 20, 1827, Vol. 1, No. 6).

CASH FOR CAST OFF CLOTHES

Wanted to purchase a large quantity Of cast off Clothes, for which the highest price will be given by THOMAS L. JENNINGS, No. 110 Nassau-st., formerly of No. 64; who has constantly on hand at the above place; a general assortment of second hand clothes, at the lowest price for cash. N.B. Those persons who wish to Dispose of clothes will please send their Address at above or send their articles before sun-set.

(*Freedom's Journal*, Fri., Sept. 28, 1827, Vol. 1 No. 2).

Thomas L. Jennings is documented as the first African American to receive a U.S. patent. The patent was for the invention of a dry cleaning process in 1821 (Time Life Books: 1993:27).

UNION INN

No. 35 Leonard Street, near Chapel-st.

C. BOYER returns his sincere thanks for the very liberal encouragement which he has received since the opening of the above Establishment, and hopes to merit a continuance of the same, by paying attention to the wishes and comforts of his patrons.

(*Freedom's Journal*, Fri., June 22, 1827, Vol. 1 No. 15).

The Union Inn was the only hotel in New York City in 1827 which would admit African Americans.

LOTS WANTED

TWO LOTS, or the rear of two lots, where there is any convenient communication with the street, are wanted, for the erection of a Presbyterian Church. The location must be between Reed and Spring, Hudson and Orange streets — One within the above Bounds, 25 feet or more, by 75, would answer. Inquire of S.E. Cornish, No. 6 Varick street, New York, March 20.

(*Freedom's Journal*, Fri., Aug. 24, 1827, Vol. 1 No. 24).

"Advertisements for boarding houses, tea gardens, land, the African Free Schools, and other educational ventures, etc. abound in *Freedom's Journal*, *The Rights for All*, *The Weekly Advocate*, and *The Colored American*... These advertisements offer a glimpse of African American life in the urban North during the nineteenth century.

Notices for concerts, ceremonial dinners, cleaning services, tailors, medicines and treatments, restaurants, and hotel accommodations, etc., attest to the notion that free Africans in nineteenth century New York City had indeed been highly successful in developing and establishing goods, services, associations and organizations to meet their needs...". (Wilson: 1994:70).

Salzman, Smith and West, note the format and emphasis of the publication:

Freedom's Journal followed a format common to antebellum re-

form newspapers by using current events, anecdotes, and editorials to convey the message of moral reform. The editors also focused on issues of interest to northern free blacks; racial prejudice, slavery...and the threat of colonization — the efforts by the American Colonization Society to expatriate free blacks to Africa (1991:1065).

The issue of colonization led to the resignation of Samuel Comish, from the newspaper in September 1827, and later to the cessation of the publication in March 1829, when Russwurm departed for Liberia. In May, 1829 Cornish revived the newspaper as *The Rights for All* (Gross:1932:249).

Freedom's Journal was financially supported by its African American subscribers, thus empowering its editors financially and morally to be a voice for African Americans in New York and throughout the nation. Gross also notes:

The paper was owned and supported by the Colored people themselves...The income from the papers was chiefly from the subscriptions, the commercial advertisements and the job and fancy printing at the office (1932:249).

"Authorized Agents" for *Freedom's Journal* successfully solicited subscribers from the following states, in addition to New York: Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, Washington, D.C. and Port-Au-Prince, Haiti.

Cornish's third effort to unify African Americans, enslaved and free, through publication, was *The Colored American*, published from 1837

to 1841 on Spruce Street. This weekly newspaper was co-edited by journalist and educator, Philip Bell. According to Sandra Roff:

"It [*The Colored American*] was financially supported by abolitionists and dedicated to advancement of Black Americans. Cornish resigned in 1839 and was replaced by Charles Bennett Ray, pastor of the Bethesda Congregational Church, and an active member of the Underground Railroad in New York City," (Jackson:1994: 255).

The first three African American publications: *Freedom's Journal*, *Rights for All*, and *The Colored American*, although New York City based, were of national importance to enslaved Africans as well as free people of color. Cornish and his associates pioneered efforts at being a voice for the African American people.

In total, more than thirty five African American newspapers originated in New York State during the nineteenth century, including *The Ram's Horn*, *The Anglo-African*, *The New York Age*, and Frederick Douglass' *The North Star*.

[Editor's Note: All advertisements from 19th century newspapers appear in their original format. The author has made no spelling or grammatical edits of this material.]



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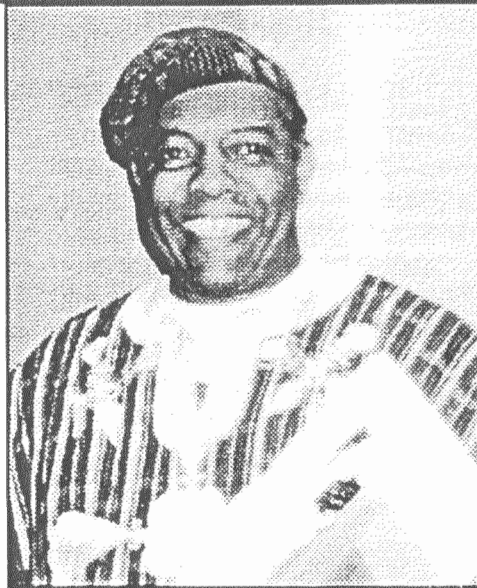
AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND PROJECT PROFILES

Deborah A. Wright

“I felt personally violated and felt something needed to be done about it” declared Dr. Joe Jackson recalling his feelings, during the excavation of the African Burial Ground (ABG) site. “I felt I needed to do whatever I could do in my own little way.”

Dr. Jackson, who had been on the faculty of Lehman College’s SEEK Program for close to twenty-five years, when the remains were recovered, added that “I not only felt violated, but also guilty, because I felt I was a part of the system that helped perpetuate the destruction of the information of our African heritage.” He cites for example, that Lehman had an anthropology department that had never graduated a Black student. Stating that far too many educators at Lehman were, “living off the fat of the land,” Dr. Jackson based his feelings of guilt on the fact that he was a part of that system and did not even complain about it.

When the story of the ABG surfaced, Joyce Jenkins Jones, a secretary to one of the Deans at Lehman College, called Dr. Jackson, and asked if he had seen the article in the paper. Ms. Jones organized a program in commemoration of the burial ground ancestors and Dr. Jackson, so impressed by her efforts, joined her in creating a program that was in his words, “absolutely fantastic.” After that, they spread the word throughout the community and consolidated with the various groups who were meeting across the city, and demonstrating downtown at the site.



OPEI Volunteer Dr. Joe Jackson



Photo credit: OPEI

Subsequently, recounts Dr. Jackson, “The bones were transferred to Lehman, and when that happened, I felt it was my job to monitor — to be the eyes and ears, and I watched.” Dr. Jackson candidly explained how he and descendent community members cleaned and decorated the room where the ancestral remains were being housed. They placed whatever spiritual items they could in the room, and in order to embrace the community at large, organized other programs which included spiritual ceremonies for the ancestors.

“There were a lot of painful days at Lehman,” recalls Dr. Jackson, “A lot of opportunism, a lot of lying. Things like lying to Dr. Blakey and only expos-

ing him to a certain part of the housed bones.” Inadequate care of the bones — wrapping them in newspapers — were some of the areas of conflict between Dr. Jackson, administration and others.

The strong ethical response and sensitivity to the well-being of the ABG ancestors exhibited by Dr. Jackson, are likely rooted in his childhood. He speaks with pride about growing up in Savannah, Georgia and how truly blessed he was for having known both his grandparents and his great grandparents. “...I was around oral history a whole lot,” relates Dr. Jackson, “I wasn’t only around my great grandparents, I was around a whole lot of elders. A lot of old people.”

Dr. Jackson recollects the diversity of Native Americans in the Savannah population, and speaks proudly of what he terms as his “first recognition,” of the importance of honoring the memory of ancestors occurring when he was in the third grade. His drawing of Savannah’s memorial Indian tombstone was awarded first prize. In retrospect, Dr. Jackson views that event as a harbinger of his later intense participation with the ABG.

“Where I come from my grandparents...went to the cemetery for two things, to clean the family plot off or to go deposit the body. When I go to Savannah, the first thing I do when I cross that Savannah bridge is go straight to the cemetery and talk to my grandparents and great grandparents. Then I go see the living.



My first stop is always the cemetery. I have strong ancestral connections and have been traditionally driven by that all of my life."

Dr. Jackson earned his Bachelor of Science degree from North Carolina A&T, and shares that it was during those college years, that he began to address his adventurous spirit through travel. He visited Canada, where he evoked the Underground Railroad and imagined he was on the very same streets where his ancestors had walked after their long passage from captivity.

The yearning to learn more about Black people in the Diaspora, was fed when Dr. Jackson had the opportunity to visit Haiti on a transcultural conference. Of the experience he relates, "physically I was in Haiti, but spiritually I was in Africa." Dr. Jackson further explains that his "...maternal great grandfather was a part of a group of sailors [who] came [to the U.S. from Haiti] to save Savannah." Dr. Jackson returned to Haiti at least eight more times, and extended his travels to other Caribbean islands as well. He says that he fashioned himself as an "explorer, travelling to the places where Black folks had settled, or had been dropped off."

It was these trips, which prepared him for his first trip to Africa. In 1980, he travelled to Ghana, which he states matter-of-factly, "is his heart." It was in Ghana, Dr. Jackson tenderly recounts, where he met his wife of fifteen years. That union has graced them with two beautiful daughters.

Receiving his Doctorate in Counseling Psychology, Dr. Jackson has always been concerned about the welfare of Black youth. At Lehman college, Dr.

Jackson was an advocate for the students. He asserts that he knew every Black student on campus, and was, by the students' mandate, Faculty Advisor for practically all of the Black organizations on campus. Consistent with his concern and love for the youth, he developed a training model for urban Black students to aid them in the transition from high school to college, entitled "Transitional Training: A Teaching Model for Urban Black College Students."

No longer at Lehman College, this proud warrior functions as a consultant and is establishing "Middle Passage," a business which will locate financial assistance for youth desiring to further their education. He is also the Program Director and Mentor of the "Sons of the Blue Nile Rites of Passage," a program originating from Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, N.Y.

Dr. Jackson poignantly tells of his grandfather's message to him, "Never forget the bridge that took you across." He says that the ancestors took him across many waters and it was now time to pay back. "And that's what I was doing. That's why I became a volunteer, and that's why I will continue to be a volunteer," says Dr. Jackson.

He recently delivered a very effective, down to earth keynote address at our 1997 annual Youth Symposium. We at OPEI consider Dr. Jackson one of the veritable heroes of the African Burial Ground.

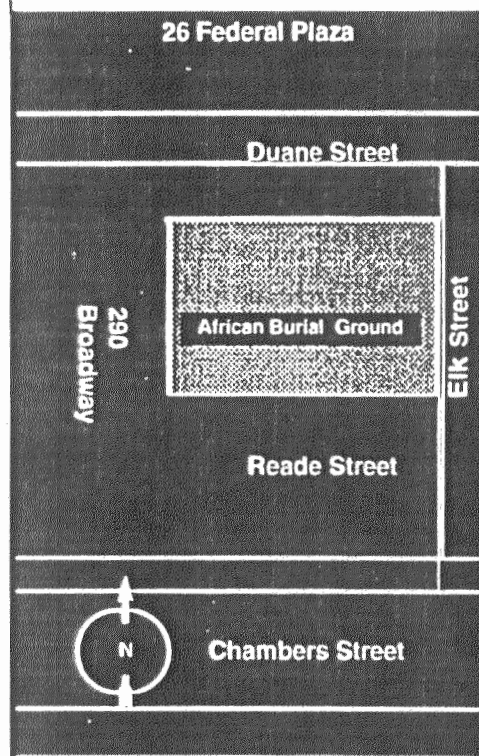
This revised article originally appeared in The Cornerstone, Vol. 1, Issue No. 4. Deborah A. Wright is the Senior Editor of Cornerstone, OPEI's newsletter for African Burial Ground volunteers.



African Burial Ground Map/Fact Sheet

Out of town visitors often ask about the African Burial Ground's exact location. In the map below, the African Burial Ground is shown south of 26 Federal Plaza and behind 290 Broadway. Here are some facts about the site:

- o This surviving portion of the African Burial Ground was originally part of a 5 to 6 acre cemetery whose exact boundaries are still unclear.
- o An estimated 10-20,000 men, women and children were buried at the original site.



- o The earliest documented use of the cemetery is 1712, although it may have originated earlier. The cemetery was closed some time after 1794.
- o The African Burial Ground became a New York City Landmark within the Commons Historic District on Feb. 25, 1993. It gained National Historic Landmark status on April 19, 1993.
- o Current plans for the site include memorialization and reinterment. The 427 human remains excavated between 1991-92, are currently under study at Howard University. Plans are underway for reburial at the site by the year 2000.



African Burial Ground Update

□ **Dr. Blakey speaks at U.N. Conference.** On August 19, 1997, Dr. Michael L. Blakey addressed the United Nations' Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, Commission on Human Rights, in Geneva Switzerland. This was the second year that Dr. Blakey had been invited to address the Commission on the significance of the New York African Burial Ground in the struggle for and against the human rights of African Americans. He was made a Permanent Representative of the African Bureau of Educational Sciences, Organization of African Unity, to better facilitate continuing U.N. discussions about collaboration between African Americans and African nations concerning the national landmark site. Imam Muhammad Hatim of the Malik Shabazz Human Rights Institute also presented at the U.N. and was made a Permanent Representative. — **S. D. Wilson**

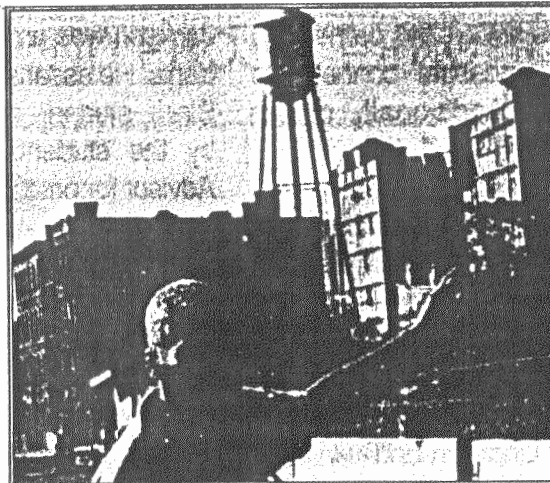
□ **Reflections on OPEI's Summer Interns.** In June, 1997, OPEI was asked by the Vanguard Urban Improvement Association, based in Brooklyn, N.Y., if we would sponsor two interns for the summer. The students that were chosen were Scott Foster and Patrick Stephen.

We wanted their experience at the African Burial Ground to be memorable, an experience that they could walk away from proud and informed about their heritage. Scott and Patrick were required to read articles and view all documentary films made on the project. They wrote essays on the information they learned. By assisting with the enormous mailing of our newsletter *Update*, sitting in on presentations, learning efficient ways of taking down questions, and making educational packets and press kits, they got a true sense of OPEI operations and the educational goals of our office.

Scott and Patrick now have a bit more knowledge about life and have some choices about the road they choose for themselves. Working and speaking for the ancestors is such a worthy deed. It connects us to our past. Helping anyone, especially youth, to understand the importance of that connection is our task. — **C. D. Pittman**

Related Items:

□ **New Insights into Jersey City History.** OPEI volunteer Vincent Dillard considers himself to be a student of history. Inspired by the work of New Jersey historians Glen Cunningham and Ted Brunson, he recently conducted a tour of the downtown Jersey City area where, according to 19th century maps, an African Burial Ground existed at the intersection of Johnson and Pine (shown above right). The tour concluded at the area bordering the Liberty Science Center, where a waterfront village called Communipaw once existed.



Vincent Dillard points to a water tower at Johnson & Pine Streets which marks the former site of a 19th century African Burial Ground.

Photo credit:
Tamara Jubilee

Occupied by the Dutch as early as the 17th century, it seems likely that Communipaw's enslaved population utilized the cemetery. This early African community is still being researched by Vincent who promises to keep OPEI readers informed. — **E. L. Brown**

□ **Seneca Village Update.** Former OPEI Public Educator Cynthia Copeland, is a co-curator of *Before Central Park: The Life and Death of Seneca Village*, currently on display at the New York Historical Society. She and co-curator Grady Turner, Director of the Education Department, report an impressive response to the exhibit which retraces the site's origins in 1825 to its demise in 1857. Seneca Village was a stable community with its own schools and churches situated between 82nd and 88th Streets and Seventh and Eighth Avenues. It was destroyed to make way for Central Park. "The story of Seneca Village, as interpreted in the exhibit, is not just about the village," Cynthia explained, "but places it within a historical context to give visitors a sense of the local and national events and issues that led to the creation of what appears to be Manhattan's first significant African American property owning community. Issues of suffrage, property ownership, education, media depiction, racism and the like are explored."

She also informs us that one of the most exciting developments concerning the site involves future excavation. "The preliminary stages of mapping, testing, and surveying the area are underway to propose to the City and the Central Park Conservancy that a systematic archaeological dig take place in the former Seneca Village site," she said. "An archaeological excavation could give us greater insight into day-to-day activities, and a closer examination of the material culture developed, used, and possibly made by the area's residents." *The New York Historical Society is located at 2 West 77th Street at Central Park West. For information please call 212.873.3400.*

--- **E. L. Brown**

□ **Update on Flushing Burial Ground.** In a previous issue of *Update*, (vol. 2, no.2), it was reported that Mandingo Osceola Tshaka was leading a drive to have Martin's Field Playground at 164th Street in Flushing restored to its former status as Flushing's Colored Cemetery. It now appears that he has been

successful in persuading City Council members to help him achieve that goal.

Tshaka, a descendant of family members buried at the site, spoke at a City Council hearing in April. He detailed a decision made by city officials to create a playground at the site in 1936 that resulted in damage to burials, tombstones and artifacts. He stressed the fact that a number of burials are still present at the site. City Councilwoman Julia Harrison, a strong advocate for the cemetery, announced in June, 1997 that the City Council had approved a million dollar grant to renovate the playground *and* to restore the cemetery.

— E. L. Brown

OPEI MINI CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Compiled by Chadra D. Pittman

Fri., Sept. 12, 1997 N.Y. State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation will host a meeting and panel discussion on **N.Y. African American historic sites** which will include Dr. Sherrill D. Wilson. Call (518) 237-8643 ext. 255 for details.

Tues., Sept. 16, 1997 at 1:00 p.m. Dr. Warren Perry will present an overview of the **Archaeological Process for the African Burial Ground** at New York Unearthed, 17 State St., N.Y. Call (212) 748-8628 for further information.

Sat., Sept. 20, 1997 OPEI presents an **African Burial Ground Project Film Festival** at 6 WTC, U.S. Custom House, Rm. 239, from 12:00 noon to 5:00 p.m. Call (212) 432-5707.

Sat., Oct. 4, 1997 the 1997 Winterthur Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Material Life presents Dr. Michael L. Blakey who will lecture on **The African Burial Ground: The Biology of Enslaved Africans in Colonial New York**. For information call (800) 448-3883 by September 15.

Wed., Oct. 8, 1997 attend a lunch time slide lecture on the **N.Y. African Burial Ground** by Dr. Sherrill D. Wilson. South St. Seaport Museum. Call (212) 748-8628 for information.

Fri., Oct 10, 1997 the Historic Hudson Valley Museum, Tarrytown, N.Y. will present **Unheard Voices, Unseen Faces: New Historiography on Enslaved Africans in the North**, a panel discussion with Dr. Sherrill D. Wilson. Call (914) 631-8200 for information.

Tues., Oct. 21, 1997 at 7:00 pm Dr. Warren Perry will give a lecture on the **African Burial Ground Artifacts and the Archaeological Process**, at the Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury, Ct. in conjunction with the NAACP at 144 West Main St. For information call Marie Galbreath at (203) 753-0381 ext. 14.

Sat., Nov. 15, 1997 OPEI's **Fall Educators Symposium** will be held from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm. This day long event will include the viewing of documentary films, laboratory and site tours, and updates from Howard University. For information call (212) 432-5707.



SANKOFA

(For my Ancestors buried in the vicinity of
290 Broadway – prior to 1827)

by Millicent Rucker ©

Before their oops
I felt your screams
In subway screeches
Scratching bends
Phantom feet in fever
Melting gutters
Whispers up sewer caps
SANKOFA

Wall Street trade
Secret
Buried deeper than the A train
Lain so long llars lapse
Dig you
Can't hush your
great gittin up
Mourning
SANKOFA

Bedrock bones
Buked scorned
No baobab bosom
Drums walls
White clothed mourners
moans
To laud you
Set your spirit free
SANKOFA

Watched the stars
Till truth tellin time
Plucks you
From grave
Desecration
Starved teeth tired bones
Declare your sanctity
Mandate respect
SANKOFA

You leave the sign
In rusty tacks on
Leaky coffin lids
Rusty tacks tapped into
Our hearts
In spirit our past
Re member your future
SANKOFA

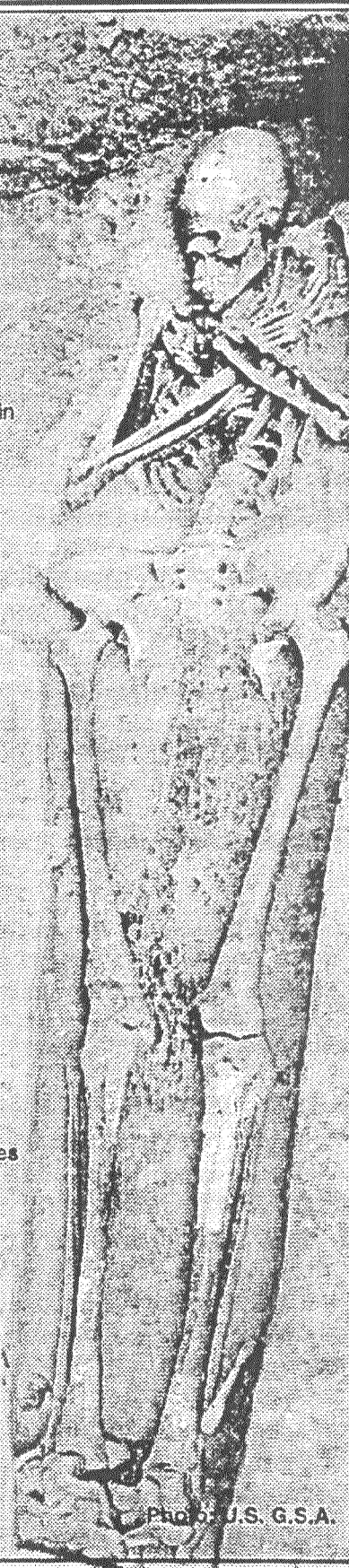


Photo: U.S. G.S.A.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CEMETERIES:

An interview with Richard Dickenson, Staten Island Historian

*Emilyn L. Brown and
Tamara R. Jubilee*

Over the past 20 years, Richard Dickenson has served in a number of unsalaried positions that include the New York State Cemetery Board Citizen's Advisory Council, organized to monitor abandoned cemeteries, and as a board member of the Sandy Ground Historical Society. He is the president of Staten Island's Friends of Abandoned Cemeteries, and was recently chosen by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to serve on the Municipal Archives Reference and Research Advisory Board.

He is also the organizer of an annual memorial ceremony for Colonel Robert Gould Shaw who lived on Staten Island during the Civil War. Colonel Shaw led the African American men of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment in battle as depicted in the film "Glory."

In 1991, in recognition of his longstanding scholarship and untiring commitment to historical preservation, Richard Dickenson was appointed to the post of Borough Historian by Borough President Guy Molinari. He is the first of two African Americans in New York City to hold this post.

EB: Before we discuss your preservation work in Staten Island, please tell our readers about your early involvement with the Broadway Block African Burial Ground.

RD: A prescient result of meeting Idilio [Ed. note: Idilio Gracia-Pena is the former commissioner and a prime organizer of New York's Department of Records and Information Services] was that in 1981 he gave me a copy of a deed of transfer for the Broadway property but it did not contain any Afro-American names.

While reviewing Stokes Iconography of Manhattan I saw many references to the Negroes Burying Ground, which I incorporated in my research. I wrote



Fig. 1:

Richard Dickenson (ctr.) explains the layout of the Staten Island Cemetery to E. Brown and V. Dillard during a recent tour of the site.

All photos by
Tamara R. Jubilee

an article about early Black Manhattanites which the late Kevin Stryker-Rodda, then editor of the New York Genealogical & Biographical Society, published in two parts in 1985.

I made a supposition about the possible interments based on the history of early enslaved Africans held by the Dutch. We really don't know where those people were buried and we don't know who was buried in the African Burial Ground. It's nearly impossible to get relevant records. Sometimes a church may have useful records or hopefully some historian wrote something in a pamphlet, but you have to do a lot of archival work.

EB: Former Mayor Dinkins played such a crucial role in preserving the site. It's ironic that before his election, city officials sold the land to the Federal government with full awareness of the cemetery.

RD: Before they started construction at the site, I happened to come across a newsletter of Community Board No. 1. It explained how city and federal officials had circumvented the Uniform Land Review Process (ULURP) so there would be

no hearings held on the sale of land and its use for a federal building. If they had gone through the usual process it would have brought more attention to the site. You can see very clearly on the map there was an African Burying Ground. But they found a way out. I wondered what was going to happen and after a while I began hearing that construction was underway.

EB: How did you become involved in cemetery preservation?

RD: Back in 1982 a friend who I had known a few years, became director of the State Division for Cemeteries. His name was Pearse O'Callaghan and he invited me to a meeting in an abandoned cemetery on Staten Island. He was trying to approach the problem of abandoned cemeteries throughout the state beginning with his Staten Island home base. There was no money to rehabilitate these cemeteries and so I think the meeting was to see if he could get something started on his own turf. Our first project was a clean up of the State controlled Staten Island Cemetery (see Fig. 2).

We tried Halloween as a day for a clean-up because we thought people would identify with the idea of ghosts and goblins. Now we've come to think of that as a little tacky, but it was worth trying at the beginning. The problem with a volunteer approach, of course, is that you don't have consistent maintenance. We have approximately eight abandoned cemeteries on Staten Island and four or five of them are owned by the city.

The Staten Island Cemetery really consists of three: The Fountain Cemetery, Staten Island Cemetery, and Trinity Chapel Cemetery. The latter is owned by the City, which once tried to sell it off but could not because no one could build on it as long as they knew it was a cemetery. The other two have been since reincorporated and I am a board member. [Ed. note: Friends of Abandoned Cemeteries has a 5013 (C) tax exempt status]

EB: What accomplishments or difficulties has your group experienced?

RD: We were able to use some of the assets of the cemetery to do some clean-ups now and then, but we really need a year round staff. There is not enough income from burials and burials are the principal means of obtaining money for a cemetery. We're just using the interest on the principal sum that was left behind for that particular cemetery.

There are other cemeteries here that have no principal or anything, so what we do is clean them up once in a while. We get calls about them, we find records if we can, and we take people to where their relatives are buried. We do a number of things that will help people who are concerned about the cemetery.

For graffiti you need a lot of space to store materials to clean off the stones and we don't have a storage place. We really need to expand but the board

Fig. 2: An estimated 5,000 remains are believed to be interred within the dense overgrowth of The Staten Island Cemetery. Part of the site was owned by Joseph Ryerrs, a freed Black.

Today volunteers are working to rid the site of discarded household items, car parts, food wrappers and beer cans.



wants to stay a volunteer board and not run a commercial operation cleaning up cemeteries year round. I think that is what is required, but it is not what the group wants at this point in time.

This past year we participated with the Borough President in cleaning up Merrill Cemetery. Joseph Merrill was one of two Congressional Medal of Honor winners on Staten Island. A Staten Island Ferry was named after him. His grandfather, as it turns out, is buried here and when members of the Merrill family went to the cemetery they found graffiti, stones overturned, and a developer working right next to it. They complained to us and then to the Borough President.

He [Molinari] had used some inmates from the Arthur Kill Correction Facility for cleaning up some other public places and decided to use them for the cemetery. They cleaned two or three different cemeteries during the Spring, before the weeds become really thick and fast growing. But even with all their work, by the time June came around, you would never know that anyone had been in there at all. That's the problem, you have to keep at it on at least a weekly or daily basis.

EB: Are you finding evidence of vandalism in other cemeteries?

RD: Yes, not only vandalism, but there are more serious things that go on too.

You can see evidence of cultism, with signs, circles and diagrams, and burnt circles. Some people think this is the place to do this kind of thing, particularly because it is dark and isolated. I think these things are difficult to do in cemeteries that are policed or monitored more frequently, but it still happens. In the Jewish cemeteries out here on the Island, in Queens and Brooklyn, there are stones which are frequently toppled. I don't know if it's a contest of strength or a desire to upset viewers of this desecration.

EB: What other organizations help you in your preservation goals?

RD: Basically what one has to do is learn about the community organizations in the vicinity of the cemetery, whether they be schools, churches, businesses and groups such as archivists or local historical societies. You have to consult with them, and involve them in the preservation of cemeteries.

EB: Can you tell us about some of the history associated with cemeteries on Staten Island?

RD: The Staten Island Cemetery has an interesting history. A Black man named Joseph Ryerrs, freed by his owner, Judge Gozen Ryerrs, acquired land on Alaska Street in 1811. He lived on the land until 1846 and buried his family there. When Ryerrs died and the



Fig. 3: Numerous tombstones have been broken or toppled from their base.

land was sold, it expanded to become the Staten Island Cemetery. Even before that, in colonial times, the land was well known as a pre-colonial Native American burial ground.

The DeHart family, one of the best documented and one of the oldest Black families on Staten Island, is also buried here. Mr. Nicholas DeHart was the patriarch of the family and the sexton at Ascension Church and the earlier Trinity Chapel. He succeeded Joseph Ryers who worked as sexton for the earlier Trinity Chapel.

EB: Are there burial sites on Staten Island that developers have built over?

RD: There are numerous stories about burying grounds and cemeteries being built over. I heard about a hospital now known as Bailey Seton. It was formerly known as the Public Health Service Hospital in Clifton. They had a burial ground and at one point someone decided to build on it. A fence was put up around the site, some people got hold of the tombstones, took them to their houses, put them

in their backyards and new buildings were built over the cemetery. This was sometime ago, before I got involved with cemeteries. I don't think they could do it as easily today. I think there was a school built over it, and we found evidence that there was even a babies' burying ground, part of a home for young children that went out of existence. They buried children who died in their hospital. A developer, who had built all around it, finally built over it when no one was paying attention. He must have gotten it for a very low price, and I don't know who could have sold it to him.

Sometimes when its done officially, developers will disinter the bodies, take them to another place, and record it so that people will know that they were properly reburied. But in some cases they don't make any documentation, they just dig them up.

TJ: What about the idea of a burial ground preservation collective that would produce a documentary about Staten Island history and maybe generate money to do more clean-up?

RD: I'm all for that kind of thing and would like to see it done. It may lead to some of these cemeteries being cleaned up and more attention being given to them because people tend to forget. Churches should take more of a role in cemetery restorations, Black churches especially. Maybe it's putting too much weight on them because they are a smaller but, I think, an important group. Church members may feel angry about a body being put into a cemetery that isn't being taken care of, but unless they have some very active people in the church taking an interest, it will happen. I do occasionally talk with them but I don't get to cover all the churches.

TJ: What about funeral directors? My grandfather was a funeral director who used to work directly with churches to

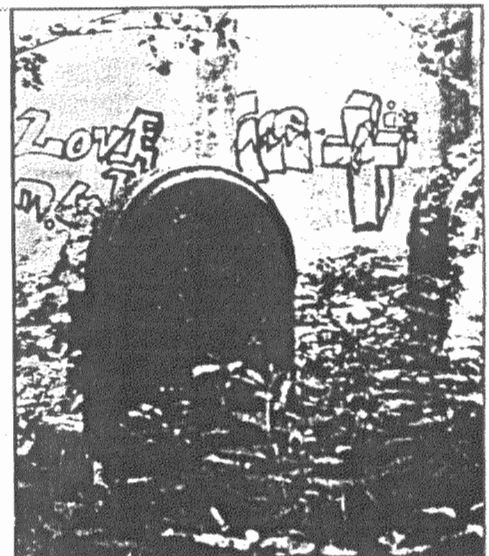


Fig. 4: Graffiti is scrawled on many of the tombstones and on a walled enclosure, believed to have been part of the original building which housed Trinity Chapel during the 19th century.

make sure burial grounds were cleaned up.

RD: They are businessmen and their business interests would seem to include that. They try to find a place to bury them and they can get some money from the state; there is a fund for what they call untitled burials.

There is another position in New York City called public administrator. They are appointed by the surrogate judge for people who are intestate (have no will). They try to find someone or some funds for burial and they have one in each of the boroughs for that particular purpose.

They sometimes ask funeral directors to take someone on a charitable basis. Some active cemeteries try to make a business out of it. Funeral directors may conduct burials for indigent people but they don't take an active interest in cleaning up an abandoned cemetery.

EB: What about cemeteries that are endangered? What do you tell concerned citizens?



A policeman can effectively tell them [developers] to close down, but the authority must come from

Extensive damage at the landmark site included the destruction of 26 tombstones. Sandy Ground is one of the oldest, documented burial grounds for free and enslaved Africans in the nation. Concerned citizens and volunteers have already begun organizing to raise funds for repair while the police continue their investigation].

Friends of Abandoned Cemeteries conducts walking tours and historical lectures about Staten Island's Cemeteries. For a schedule of events, general information, or inquiries concerning volunteer work, please call (718) 816-2137.



Howard University's Cobb Lab in Washington, D.C. is open to the public Fridays from 10:00 am to 11:00 a.m. or Saturdays between 10:00 am and 12 noon. To schedule an appointment please call (202) 806-5252.

- o **An extensive Update from Howard University**



THE CHILDREN'S CORNER

We wrote these poems in honor of the African Burial Ground. We chose different topics. All have some type of reflection in them. I hope you enjoy these lovely poems that you helped inspire....

Oniga E. Moonsammy
St. Catherine of Genoa School

The Children

by Oniga Moonsammy
Class 7-1

I saw the body of a child
Worked to death
Punished
Malnourished
Mistreated
Which one happened to You?

A childhood robbed,
flesh and muscle
torn from the
bone.

A mournful cry
Reaches out
To you from
Your hope of
A better future
Your struggle was not in vain.

Burial Ground (Africans)

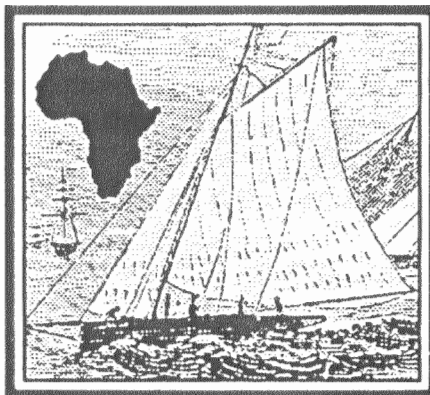
by Rose Paul
Class 7-2

Africans, dead ones!
Wow!
Artifacts, monuments and bones;
It reminds us of dead Africans.
They are our ancestors,
Soon, we will be ancestors,
We don't know when.
When we hear cries on our minds,
We wish we were there to do something.
Oh mighty God in Heaven,
We know you were with them.

The Burial Ground shows us what
Trouble they went through.
Why them? We wonder why them?

Because of You (I'm Here)
by Christine Jean Louis
Class 7-1

You are a hero
You are a fighter
You are faith
Because of you I am here
You are my brother and sister
You are incredible
You are a singer who kept hope
alive and because of you I am here.



Whispers From My Ancestors' Grave
Samantha Noel
Class 7-2

The guide at the burial ground told
stories of the old,
The very old days of long ago
When my ancestors came and died
In a land quite far from home.

Then suddenly from the grave
I heard,
The bones of my ancestors moan,
and their lonely voices groan
"We suffered long and
hard my dear,
And gave our lives without fear
So that you, our children,

May one day soar like eagles
in the air".

"Listen long and listen hard
To every word you hear.
And use them well and use them wise
When you are gone from here.
For our stories must help to guide
you, when you are in despair."

"Untitled"
by David Smikle
Class 7-1

They used to work with the sun
beaming on their backs but still
had confidence
They used to work in the fields all day
but still had hope
They were spanked like little children
but they still had courage
They were taunted at, chased, and
laughed at but they still kept their
heads up.

"I respect the many African Americans
who were buried in the African Burial
Grounds, and the African American
people who went through this.

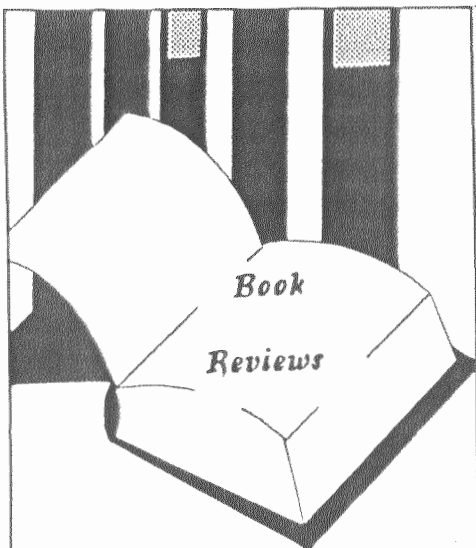
Don't Praise Them Respect Them
by Fayola Pierre
Class 7-1

Don't glorify them
Just honor them
If it wasn't for them,
we will not be here.
Don't forget them.
Don't just stare

Honor them, with all your love
But don't praise them,
They are not super natural
They are our ancestors,
our people

Retain this, don't praise them
Just admire, love and honor them.





Science Books for Young Readers

Book: Bear's Explorer
Nature Book
Author: Andy Cooke
Publisher: Barron's Educational
Series Inc.
Price: \$14.95
Reviewer: Donna Harden Cole

Bear's Explorer Nature Book is a hands on introduction to science for the youngest child. It comes in a kit form and focuses on the wonderful world of exploring nature. It's a great start for youngsters interested in their environment. It shows them how to "dig for things" and is perfect for the would be archaeologist. The main character is "Bear" an inquisitive "Smokey the Bear Type" who acts as a tour guide for the young reader as they travel through the various processes of learning about soil, trees, and the seasons.

Along with the easy to follow reader, the child is equipped with all the essential tools to prepare the young archaeologist for their first dig or excavation. The kit contains a

child sized trowel, a small hand tool used to scrape the soil and help dig up buried items. There are also tweezers, a magnifying glass, bug container and small plastic creatures.

Bear guides the reader to seek out different aspects of nature, like looking for small bugs which are described to the reader. This jovial character also shows the child examples of how to dig up soil with the trowel and place it in a container. Then using the tweezers, just as an archaeologist would, the young explorer can pick out the tiny bugs and other objects found in the soil. Using the magnifying glass the youngster can see what she or he has collected.

The young archaeologist can use the Nature Book as a guide to design their own nature adventure using a variety of settings from the backyard, to the seaside, to the woods and more! The final chapter in the book is a wonderful checklist for kids to remember so that their nature walk can be as safe as it is interesting. Entitled "Bear's Handy Tips," children are advised to wear strong boots when working in the dirt, to watch out for insects or plants that sting, and to check with grown-ups on what types of fruit or plants may or may not be edible.

The Bear's Explorer series are designed for children ranging in age from 3 years and above. So hurry to your nearest bookstore to start your little archaeologist on their nature walk. Happy digging!



Bibliographic Resources for Children

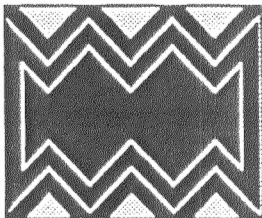
Compiled by Donna Harden Cole
and Joella Morris

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Dark Horse Productions Ltd. \$22.95
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1997 Random House, Inc. \$10.79

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